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ABSTRACT

Standard English has long been the unquestioned choice of a model for all language instruction, whether in native or non-native speaker countries. Fanned by the recent interest in new varieties of English, especially those in the Third World, there have been increasing claims that it is best in such English-as-a-Second-Language countries to set up the local variety of English as the target model for those learning the language. This paper focuses on the situation in Malaysia, and examines whether the local variety of English, Malaysian English, can be a viable educational target for teaching English in Malaysia. The paper confines the discussion to written English, to the exclusion of pronunciation and accent, because the answers to questions of models are not necessarily similar for both speech and writing. (JL)

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MODELS FOR WRITTEN ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

Irene F. H. Wong

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

'Standard English' has long been the unquestioned choice of a model for all language instruction, whether in native-speaker or nonnative-speaker countries. It is defined by Strevens (1983: 88) as "a particular dialect of English, being the only non-localized dialect, of global currency without significant variation, universally accepted as the appropriate educational target in teaching English; which may be spoken with an unrestricted choice of accent". However, in the last decade or two, fanned by the recent interest in new varieties of English, especially those of the Third World, there have been increasing claims that it is best in such ESL countries to set up the local variety of English as the target model for those learning the language.

This paper focuses on the situation of Malaysia, and examines whether, in the light of new insight into the 'new Englishes', the local variety of English, Malaysian English, can be a viable educational target for teaching English in the country. In order not to confuse between standards for speech and those for writing, this paper confines itself to written English, to the exclusion of features of pronunciation and accent, because the answers to questions of models are not necessarily similar for both speech and writing.

Of course, it would be ideal to have more than one target for language instruction in Malaysia. A variety of standards could then be taught, each appropriate to its own register; or, at the least, two models may be necessary, standard English for international use, and Malaysian English for intranational use. But for a country like Malaysia at the moment, this is not feasible, and English teaching must be content with the choice of only one educational target, although within the country several registers of use will be found to exist.

The claim has been made that, English being only the second language of the country, it is only a small elite group who will need to use English for international purposes. Hence, setting standard English as the model will mean great wastage in terms of time and resources. The majority of Malaysians will need English only for intranational use, for which purpose the local variety of English would suffice.

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However, on the other hand, there are opposing claims, such as Quirk's (1989: 22-3) that locals are "learning English not just to speak with their own country folk but to link themselves with the wider English-using community throughout the world. It is neither liberal nor liberating to permit learners to settle for lower standards than the best, and it is a travesty of liberalism to tolerate low standards which will lock the least fortunate into the least rewarding careers."
Many such views which have been expressed for either an exonormative or an endonormative standard tend to be based mainly on pedagogical, or even political criteria rather than linguistic ones. This paper attempts to contribute to the discussion by examining the question chiefly from a linguistic standpoint.

BACKGROUND

Rise of 'new' varieties of English

English is undeniably a world-wide language today. Millions of people all over the world use it as either their mother tongue, their second language, or a foreign language. This global use of the language has given rise to diverse varieties of English, not only native-speaker varieties like British English, American English, Canadian English, and Australian English, but also, more recently, 'new' varieties such as Indian English, Nigerian English, Malaysian English, and Singapore English. These latter varieties are 'new' in the sense that they have only relatively recently begun to gain recognition and acceptance as legitimate independent national varieties of English in their own right, rather than as deviant versions of some variety of native-speaker English.
The 'campaign' for their recognition and acceptance may be said to have begun in the later part of the 1970s, fueled greatly by publications by linguists such as Braj Kachru. This campaign quickly attracted many disciples, as evidenced in the spate of articles and even books on 'new' Englishes such as Indian English, Nigerian English, Lankan English, Singapore English, Filipino English, and Malaysian English. An inherent part of this campaign was a call for acceptance of the localized norms and standards of these new varieties.

The controversy

This has led to the existence of two camps with opposing views. On the one hand, there are purists, who find that the situation of the 'new' Englishes is getting out of hand and who fear a deterioration in the use of English (see, for example, Prator 1968). On the other hand there are those like Kachru, who feel that a pragmatic approach is warranted and that a "monomodel" approach for English in the world context is neither applicable nor realistic (see Kachru 1982 and 1985).

In reality this 'controversy' may be merely a result of different emphases. The pragmatists tend to focus on what is, while the purists' concern is pedagogical standards. Thus the latter tend to be prescriptivists, whose primary concern is what should be. The problem, however, is that the distinction between these two types of interests is frequently blurred, with the result that **what is** is too often taken to be **what should be**, and thus the standard for all language use within that particular country. Moreover, many descriptions of the 'new' Englishes are of the registers meant for informal use on the intranational scene, but this has led to some taking the stand that these same descriptions are to be set as targets for the teaching of the language within each country.

Although purists realise that the interest in these varieties has been based on idealistic, humanitarian, democratic and highly reputable reasons (Quirk 1989: 20), they tend to feel that it has gone too far. As the Kingman report (quoted by Quirk 1989: 20) sees it, the result was "grossly undervaluing the baby of Standard English while overvaluing the undoubtedly important bathwater of regional, social and ethnic varieties: giving the impression that any kind of English was as good as any other, and that in denying this, nothing less was at stake than 'personal liberty' itself". As Quirk (1989: 15) puts it, "... the interest in varieties of English has got out of hand and has started blinding both teachers and taught to the central linguistic structure from which the varieties might be seen as varying".

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF THE 'NEW' ENGLISHES

Nativization

Before any 'new' variety of English can lay claim to the right to set its own standards, several criteria should be met. Firstly, English should be used as the second language of its speakers. Kachru (1985) calls such second-language varieties 'institutionalized' varieties, to distinguish them from 'performance' varieties, i.e. those used essentially as foreign languages. Of these institutionalized varieties he has this to say (p. 211):

> The institutionalized second-language varieties have a long history of acculturation in new cultural and geographical contexts; they have a large range of functions in the local educational, administrative, and legal systems. The result of such uses is that such varieties have developed nativized discourse and style types and functionally determined sublanguages (registers), and are used as a linguistic vehicle for creative writing in various genres.

This statement of Kachru's mentions the essential features which any variety of English should possess before serious claims can be made for it setting its own standards for use. These features can be summarized thus:

1. long history of acculturation in new cultural and geographical contexts;

2. large range of functions in the local educational, administrative, and legal systems;

3. nativized discourse and style types and functionally determined registers;

4. use as a linguistic vehicle for creative writing in various genres.

All these have to do with the nativization of the variety of English. Thus, in each case, English was first 'transplanted' into a new context, after which it became nativized and took on local flavour, "the result of the new ecology in which a non-native variety of English functions" (Kachru 1982: 7). Of the nativization process Kachru (1985: 213) says:

> Nativization must be seen as the result of those productive linguistic innovations which are determined by the localized functions of a second-language variety, the 'culture of conversation' and communicative strategies in new situations, and the 'transfer' from local languages.

'Deviations' versus 'mistakes'

Based upon the above so far, there are few problems with accepting the claims of the 'new' Englishes. However, Kachru (1985: 213) goes on to add: "There may also be other reasons for such innovations - for example, acquisitional limitations, inadequate teaching, and the lack of a consistent model for practice". This begins to be a bit disquieting, especially since Kachru makes no attempt to discuss these 'other reasons' and how they may affect his arguments about the nativization process. He chooses rather to concentrate on 'authentic' linguistic innovations, which he calls 'deviations', as distinguished from 'mistakes', or imperfectly learnt forms of English (1982: 45):

> A 'mistake' may be unacceptable by a native speaker since it does not belong to the linguistic 'norm' of the English language; it cannot be justified with reference to the sociocultural context of a non-native variety; and it is not the result of the productive processes used in an institutionalized non-native variety of Englishes. On the other hand, a

'deviation' has the following characteristics: it is different from the norm in the sense that it is the result of the new 'un-English' linguistic and cultural setting in which the English language is used; it is the result of a productive process which marks the typical variety-specific features; and it is systematic within a variety, and not idiosyncratic. There is thus an explanation for each action within the context of situation. It can be shown that a large number of deviations 'deviate' only with reference to an idealized norm.

What Kachru calls 'deviations' would be fully acceptable as linguistic innovations, but, as Quirk points out in his abstract (1989: 14), "viewing learners' errors as evidence for the emergence of new varieties of the English language is dangerously mistaken particularly where it leads to the abandonment of Standard English as a model for learners".

One major problem to address, then, is the question of whether the local variety is just the result of the increasing failure of the education system. There is a great danger that naive teachers may too zealously follow advice like "Language behaviour which at first sight appears to be flawed may in fact be a manifestation of a new - though as yet unrecognised - variety of English" (Coleman 1987: 13). Through this, students are liberally permitted to think their 'new variety' of English is acceptable.

Gonzalez (1983: 169) has pointed out for Philippine English that "some of the features of Philippine English have arisen because in the past the rules of certain subsystems of English have never been taught at all or have never been properly taught". Hence their origin as mistakes and not deviations.

Much therefore hinges on how each 'new' variety of English differs from Standard English. If it turns out that in most cases the differences are due to errors rather than true creativity, then there is no way that that variety can gain acceptance among educationists and the media as the standard for that country. Our interest in this paper is to see how Malaysian English matches up as far as Kachru's essential features of the 'new' Englishes are concerned.

MALAYSIAN ENGLISH

Firstly, what is Malaysian English? Beginning with Kachru's list of features of what would qualify a variety of English to be considered a 'new' variety in its own right, we might note that the first three conditions are met. English has had a long history of acculturation in its new cultural and geographical environment, it has a large range of functions in the local educational, administrative, and legal systems, and it has marked nativized discourse and style types and functionally determined registers.

However, one would need to ask just which style types and functionally determined registers are used in the various functions of the language. On

educational, administrative, and legal levels (i.e. all official levels), it is not what is known as Malaysian English, in other words the 'new' variety of English, but good old standard English. This is that variety of the language which is codified in grammars and sanctioned for use as a model for all official and formal use.

A colloquial variety

Firstly, "Malaysian English" is mainly a **colloquial** variety of English, although attempts have been made to describe the English of Malaysia at three levels - the acrolectal, the mesolectal, and the basilectal. However, as the acrolectal level attempts to model itself on standard English, except in accent, there are few grounds for considering it representative of the new variety of English known as Malaysian English. It is the mesolectal level which is the most representative, and this is primarily a colloquial register, and not meant for use at formal and official functions.

Hence, although English has had a long history of acculturation in Malaysia, resulting in the formation of a localized variety of English known as Malaysian English, this localized variety of the language does not have a large range of fuctions in the local educational, administrative, and legal systems, and it does not have marked nativized discourse and style types and functionally determined registers.

Features of learners' interlanguage

Secondly, many features of Malaysian English bear a striking resemblance to ESL learners' interlanguage. Wong 1983 gives examples of many simplification features to be found in Malaysian English, such as over-generalization, omission, reduction, substitution, and restructuring. She concludes (1983: 147-8) thus:

> ... the simplification features discussed ... are in fact not unique to colloquial Malaysian English alone. Neither are many of the examples presented. That this is so is not at all surprising, for learner strategies are quite similar, whether in first, second or foreign language learning. Therefore these same simplification strategies are likely to be seen in the other varieties of English too, with the end products being highly similar in many cases.... A fitting conclusion to this paper may thus be the fact that the non-native varieties of English in general, and colloquial Malaysian English in particular, may not be as unique as they may at first appear to be. While there may undoubtedly be details which differ from one variety of English to the next, whether native speaker or non-native speaker, the basic processes are, in the main, very similar.

The point has often been made that language learners can be, and frequently are, very creative, and speakers of Malaysian English are no exception. It is true that many overcome their inadequacies in the language by creating quite novel expressions. However, while the linguist delights in studying such innovations, the educationist must take a different stand. For any linguistic innovation to receive the stamp of approval from educational authorities, it must originate from those fully proficient in the language, not from learners' compensatory communicative strategies. In Malaysia, there aren't sufficient numbers of such people fully proficient in the language to create authentic Malaysian innovations; or, if there are, they are content to use standard international English. This means that no prestigious variety for intranational use has yet been established and accepted. As such, any variety of English which contains so many features of learner interlanguage cannot and should not be the model for language learning.

Lack of creative writing

Thirdly, Kachru's final criterion is an important one. For features of a localized variety of English to gain acceptance and official sanction, it must be used as a linguistic vehicle for creative writing in various genres. Indian English, or African English, or even Singapore English would meet this criterion much better than Malaysian English. While there is a tradition of creative writing in English in Malaysia, few writers have taken it upon themselves to experiment with forging a variety of English to express its new identity.

Wong (1986: 99) has this to say of writers' seeming reluctance to use Malaysian English in their creative works before the 1970s:

> The problem with Malaysian English, however, was that it was particularly a colloquial variety of English, reserved for use in informal domains among familiars. It was thus not considered a suitable vehicle for any 'serious' use of language. Writers therefore had to be very judicious about using this variety of the language in their works, since most Malaysians were not willing to even acknowledge the existence of any variety of English in the country which was distinct from standard British English.

And so in the beginning what efforts there were to use Malaysian English in creative works can be described as half-hearted, tentative, and rather hesitant ones. There were a few bolder writers, but even here most tended to limit the use of Malaysian English to dialogue portions of their works. Efforts there have been, but we have to conclude nevertheless that there does

not exist a sufficiently large body of literature in English in Malaysia which has explored and exploited how English has adapted to its new environment. Wong's conclusion is (1986: 106):

> ... Malaysian English is mainly a functional variety of the language, and it functions very effectively within its own sphere of use, but it is seldom used in the expressive domain, which in the main is the concern of literature. Hence while Malaysian English may be effectively incorporated into a body of creative writing, it can seldom sustain that writing entirely on its own, especially if the author's theme and treatment are more within the expressive domain of use.

Colloquial Malaysian English could not meet the needs of creative writers. Ee Tiang Hong, one of the earlier Malaysian poets, in a paper entitled "Language and Imagery in Malayan Poetry" delivered at the Malayan Writers' Conference held in 1962 (cited in Wong 1986: 104), distinguished between pidgin (his term for what is now known as colloquial Malaysian English) and literary English: the former, while spoken fairly widely in the country, would not rise beyond a limited level while literary English had a wider scope. He noted that while this literary English came closest to what was generally known as Standard English, when it was employed by Malaysian poets, it broke down in its syntactical and connotational precision, and what resulted was a language which was English in origin, but with its own colour and vitality, and "as subtle as the Malayan sensibility comprehends".

As Subramaniam (1977: 90) puts it, the Malaysian writers wanted a language with "the characteristics of a language that would effectively touch the dormant energies and imagination of a people moulded by cultures in an environment different from that in which English had received its own development. Local texture could be infused into the language by colouring it with the myths, fables and legends of Malaysia".

But there has been little or no progress since 1977 in either creating or discovering such a variety of English in Malaysia. We are still waiting for such a language to emerge. Creative writing in English seems to be slowly but surely drying up in Malaysia, instead of developing and growing. Those who write creatively in English are now few and far between in Malaysia. Without this rich source of development, Malaysian English can remain no more than a 'pidgin', a colloquial, functional and informal variety of the language. Only when more creative writers strive towards producing a variety of English truly reflective of its new context can we even think of having any pedagogical standard for language instruction in the country other that standard English.

No authoritative backing

Perhaps most damaging of all, there is no authoritative backing and even official recognition for Malaysian English in Malaysia. Any interest there has been has been among linguists, but not among those whose view is important as far as pedagogical norms are concerned. As Quirk points out (1989: 22), "most of those with authority in education and the media in these countries tend to protest that the so-called national variety of English is an attempt to justify inability to acquire what they persist in seeing as 'real' English". Even in the very countries using a 'new' English, there is no agreement or determined policy within each country to put the local variety on the same footing as British English or American English.

Not only this, but Bloomfield (1985: 269) claims that even learners themselves will not usually settle for what they consider a lower educational target:

> Educated people as a whole still worry about 'correct' English. The people who run things in the world generally accept certain usages as 'correct' or even superior, and this situation is going to last for a good while, if not forever. To refuse to educate young people to use the variety of language used by the dominant figures in society will in practice be harmful to them.

No comprehensive descriptions

No doubt Malaysian English exists as a variety of English, different from standard English. For linguists, this 'new' English offers a rich mine for description and study. However, what linguistic descriptions are available are only rather sketchy. There is as yet no full description of this variety of English. A few theses there are, and some articles, on separate aspects of Malaysian English, but these can hardly form the basis if Malaysian English is to be considered a serious and viable candidate as the pedagogical norm for Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

From what has been said of Malaysian English, it should be evident that it does not meet the requirements needed before it can be seriously considered as an educational target for English teaching in the country, even for intranational use. If the day ever came when comprehensive descriptions of Malaysian English existed, when this variety of the language was sufficiently developed by creative writers and others proficient in the language, and when educational authorities came to accept it as the norm, then, and only then, can Malaysian English be a viable candidate for the pedagogical model in Malaysia. But that day is not in the foreseeable future. Hence the educational target must remain standard English.

This is not as drastic a decision as it may first appear. It does not mean putting a death sentence on the local variety of English, which will continue to flourish as long as there are English speakers in the country who use it for informal intranational purposes. The point is that Malaysian English will develop, and that speakers of English in Malaysia will imbibe it, without it being made the educational target for English instruction. On the other hand, this will not automatically be the case with standard English.

What Gonzalez says of Philippine English is equally true for Malaysian English (1983:168):

> I shall take the position that until Philippine English is really creolized (becomes the first language of a significant number of speakers who will use it as their mother tongue or one of their mother tongues), English is still a second language in the Philippines. I shall also take the position that in teaching any second language, one must accept a standard.... While accepting this standard, however, I shall make the added observation that no matter how hard the English teacher tries, a local variety will continue to develop. What the teacher and language planner must aim for is a target, all the while realizing that this target will probably never be reached except by a few apt individuals. After all, does not a foreign language teacher, or any language teacher for that matter, make attempts at the same target, all the while aware that very few of his students will really develop a perfect accent or reach a point of competence in the language equivalent to that of a native speaker?

In spite of the well-known fact that many learners will fall short of the educational target set, whatever it be, language planners and teachers should still be bound to set a target high enough so that it will not shortchange learners. The final word on this can come from Gonzalez (1983: 169-170):

Since the continuing reasons for the maintenance and propagation of English in the Philippines are both internal (a national lingua franca for domains of academic discourse, commercial and industrial transactions) and external (an international code for transactions with other nations), it behooves us to stress communicative efficiency, which would result in reinforcing convergence rather than divergence. Withal, the divergence is an inevitable process and the splits will go on, with only communication imperatives slowing down the process of language change and evolution.

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